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Everything Bad is Good for You

Description

Review of *Everything Bad is Good for You* / Johnson, Steven. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

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Everything Bad is Good for You

Posted on **March 1, 2006** by **Editor**



Review by Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Johnson, Steven. *Everything Bad is Good for You*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

Steven Johnson is one of the most prolific and thoughtful writers considering the impact of the Internet, and of electronic communications in general. We earlier reviewed one of his many books in *Interface*. [1] *Everything Bad is Good for You* is perhaps his most provocative work as he attacks head on one of the favorite shibboleths of those who decry the impact of the Internet. Many influential intellectuals perceive a steady decline from grace as civilization faces the relentless growth and ever-wider dispersion of popular culture. Within this school of thought, the substitute of Internet-distributed electronic files for hard-copy publications is perhaps the most alarming symptom of the decline of culture.

Johnson, however, not only does not see today's popular culture as inferior to classical "high culture" or in any way dangerous to learning and intellect, but also argues that, in fact, it is superior to high culture in terms of its positive impact on intellect. As he puts it: "I see a progressive story: mass culture growing more sophisticated, demanding more cognitive engagement with each passing year." (p. xiii) Or, more simply put, "...today's popular culture is making us smarter." (p. 14) For reasons that do not seem entirely apt, he denotes this process as "The Sleeper Curve."

In developing this controversial thesis, the author makes two central arguments:

- Non-literary popular culture has been growing steadily more challenging over the past thirty years.
- ...popular culture is building new mental skills fully as important as those developed by traditional high culture. (p. 23)

In elaborating upon these two points the author moves engagingly from computer gaming to television to film to neural science, to intelligence testing and on to moral philosophy. His positions are grounded throughout in recent developments from neural science. He believes that

popular culture is giving us new abilities/skills, such as *probing* (nuanced forms of intellectual exploration), *telescoping* (managing nested non-hierarchical objectives by multi-tasking in both the foreground and the deep mental background), *multithreading* (handling numerous narrative threads within a complex television program, well beyond those presented in earlier highly regarded programs (think *Hill Street Blues* vs. *The Sopranos*), and many other valuable abilities.

One of the values of the work is, we believe, giving us a vocabulary that enables us to perceive some of the impacts of popular culture that are obscured by traditional ways of analyzing or measuring knowledge.

Negotiating popular culture, including the critically excoriated reality shows, both demands and develops, Johnson argues, the ability to analyze and negotiate highly complex social networks. Think, the author, urges, of the different layered complexities of the most intricate and critically approved drama of its era, *Dallas*, vs. 24.

The author sees the Internet, with its many-to-many communication styles as a “key piece” in understanding the puzzle of the steady improvement of popular culture. (p. 116) He believes that the process of learning to negotiate and utilize the vast network of information comprising the Internet has had a “salutary effect” on our minds in three different ways:

- By virtue of being participatory
- By forcing users to learn new interfaces [2]
- By creating new channels for social interaction. (p. 118)

In Part II, Johnson jumps from the preceding arguments to an analysis of intelligence testing, to argue that the effect of increasingly complex popular culture in fact is statistically demonstrable. Where “pure problem solving is involved” Americans have gotten steadily smarter. (p. 144)

As provocative as Johnson’s work may be, it is not going to be well received by all audiences. At a minimum, the reader needs to be able to treat popular culture as a subject worthy of analysis. A basic familiarity with television and film is probably also a *sine qua non*. If you were raised in a house without a television or had only infrequent and highly selective access to one, and are proud of it, this book will only make you feel badly.

Neither would Johnson argue that mass media are any substitute for formal education. And certainly, he agrees, there are many terrible films and shows produced, as well as much awful content on the Internet.

If, however, you do see popular culture as worthy of analysis, or if you want to better understand its impact on particularly those raised before the television set and increasingly on the Internet, then you would find this book enjoyable and very thought provoking. If anyone should read it, it is probably K-12 teachers and administrators.

[1] See Drew Harrington's review of "Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software" at <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2002/01/bookrev1.php>

[2] For Johnson's thoughtful and extended analysis of this point, one might begin with his book Interface Culture. See a review in Salon at:
http://archive.salon.com/21st/feature/1997/12/cov_03feature.html

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